

# A SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY: TOWARDS A DEFINITION AND STRATEGIES FOR CULTURAL SURVIVAL.

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## Whakarāpopoto Kōrero

*Mai i te pānga tuatahi mai o te ao whānui, me tā rātou tiro manene, ko te tino arotahi a ngā kōrero aro haehae i ngā mahinga toi tāngata whenua, ko te motuhenga o ngā taonga-ā-iwi. Arā anō hoki ētahi Māori me ā rātou whāinga tōrangapū, whāinga ahurea rānei, e uta ana i te whakaaro haratau ki ngā mahi toi a te Māori. E wewete ai ngā herenga whakaaro nei, me tiki atu tētahi o ngā whakataukī i waihotia mai e Ihenga, koia hoki tētahi huarahi hei āta whakaaro atu ki te ariā whakaora tikanga. He mea whai tikanga ngā wāhanga katoa o te tipu o te rengarenga, mai i tōna whānautanga, ki tōna hemotanga atu. I tēnei tuhinga, ka tirohia te arotahi noa atu ki te pūawaitanga o te toi Māori, me ōna anga haratau, ā, ka whakatītinatia te whakaaro tērā pea kāore e tika ana ki tā te Māori titiro.*

## Abstract

*International (Western) critical discourse with First Nation artforms, from its first encounters, has often featured a concern on the part of those outside the culture with the authenticity of the tribal object. Orthodoxy in our artforms is equally a self imposed position by Māori on other Māori servicing various political and cultural objectives. A whakataukī left us by Ihenga becomes a way of exploring the notion of cultural regeneration outside these boundaries. All parts of the rengarenga lily's life cycle, referred to in Ihenga's proverb, are recognised as integral to its survival. This essay considers the concentration on simply the flowering of Māori culture and its classical templates as an unnatural and untenable activity.*

*'Me tupu i a wiwi, i a wawa, turia i te wera, piri ki te rito o te rengarenga, waiho me whakapakari ki te hua o te kawariki.'*<sup>1</sup>

*The roots of the rengarenga resprout forming a second line of defence. The flowers of the rengarenga*

*may die in the day but final renewal at night and are matured like the kawariki.*

## Mapping territory

I wanted to start here with images which provide a visual exploration of the terrain I have set myself - the notion of cultural dormancy and regeneration in Māori art and culture. At the heart of this research is this metaphor regarding the rengarenga plant which Ihenga has left us. The location for his whakataukī is geographically the same Kaipara which I look out at through my sitting room window. This is a huge inland waterway, its fingers extending to my own ancestral connections on the other side. In the distance, on most days, the strong triangle of Maungatāpere stands out on the horizon. Near this mountain stands my grandfather's tribal maunga, Whatitiri at Poroti, named after one of Ihenga's visits to the area. To the left are the Tangihua ranges sheltering my grandmother's area. Her marae, *Tirarau* at Tangitirotia, lies on the other side of these, nestled on a bend overlooking the upper Wairoa ki Tai Tokerau.

Returning to Ihenga, Uriroroi and Parawhau (my grandparents two major affiliations) are well aware of the journeys of this Arawa ancestor and his family visits in the Tai Tokerau area many centuries ago. It was further down the Wairoa river when Ihenga offered his famous reply, the basis of this whakataukī. Attacked by Nga Puhī warriors at one of his sons pā, Ihenga responded to the taunts of his besiegers "Ihenga e! me tupu i hea te tangata?" - "Ihenga from what source do men grow?" meaning, "how will men be found to defend the pā once it is taken?" which comprises the basis of the above proverbial saying.

## Anthropodium cirratum (rengarenga lily): a holistic metaphor

Our ancestors saw themselves, their behaviour and





culture reflected in the natural world. The growth patterns and natural characteristics of birds, plants and trees were the inspiration for the many metaphors left us. Although our biological diversity is more limited we still have access to the same types of plants (lily and ranunculus) and landforms which comprised the physical environment for Ihenga's words. It is these surroundings, the language he spoke and the descendants Ihenga left which give us a real link to the life behind and the meaning in his whakatauki.

Extending Ihenga's observation of *anthropodium cirratum* I would like to connect the holistic principle of regeneration contained in his saying, with the wider issue of cultural regeneration as it applies to the arts today. First a brief description of the natural properties of the rengarenga lily. A monocotyledonous plant it produces a single embryonic seed leaf with parallel veins and flowers with parts in multiples of threes. It forms large clumps, supplied by fleshy roots which vigorously feed the new rito.

Ihenga understood the principle of death and renewal in plants: the death of the lily flower to him meant the birth of the fruit. This hua (fruit) when dry, forms a seed capsule (ripening in January/February) which falling to the ground is capable of self propagation. Ihenga likened his own future to the fruiting of the rengarenga. The leader reminded his attackers that his parental status ensured that there would be another generation to look after and protect him, or failing that, to continue where he could not. In Ihenga's mind, each component performed a function vital to the overall life cycle of the plant. He understood that the rengarenga is not able to produce fruit without the flower nor to supply seed without the fruit.

Other areas of the plant were important to its survival: the vigorous root structure of the rengarenga enables the lily to multiply quickly through division. However, no one component is more important than another. The masses of white flowers produced on its long stems in summer, although showy, are no more vital to its survival than the unseen roots which were sometimes cooked and used to supplement the Māori diet. Another whakatauki, 'No te mea ra ia, he rākau tawhito, e mau ana te taitea i waho ra, e tū te kōhiwi', illustrates a similarly holistic metaphor. Both sapwood and heartwood possess different properties but are equally useful and essential to one another for the longevity of the life system.

## Permanent bloom?: application of the metaphor

While Ihenga spoke of the pua, he also respected the hua as the more vital component of the rengarenga. In cultural terms I believe we have become so concerned with the flowering nature of our artforms that we often forget about the less spectacular but no less integral stages of the cycle. The fruiting, seeding, dormancy and more mundane aspects of a culture are equally as important as its more ostentatious phases. To further elaborate my use of the metaphor, there have clearly been spectacular periods in Māori tribal art history. During these high points some of our most gifted tohunga have produced beautiful taonga (e.g. Te Whanau-ā-Apanui in the eighteenth century Te Kaha pātaka *Te Potaka*, Nga Puhī waka kōiwi, twentieth century weaver Rangimarie Hetet - korowai). However, these phases were always only integral portions in a cycle of events.

It would be unnatural to isolate one golden moment as an ever present model in such a continuum. It would equally be irresponsible to advocate these flowerings of culture as concurrently taking place across all tribal boundaries. Tohunga, great artists and the phases they worked within were the product of many political, economic, spiritual, whānau, hapū and related factors. And these factors impacted on the comparative strengths and weaknesses, in the artforms of any one tribe or sub tribal unit at any one given moment in our history. We have to approach whaneketanga in the same way we might our whakapapa. Equally I believe we have to accept our history with its strong and its weak points. The prestigious and less prestigious men and women in our genealogies. The highlights and the background. And we must also accept the argument of silence. Silence, the gaps in our knowledge, the rests and pauses in our stories.

Why then do we often insist on taonga from certain phases of our art history as classical models on which to base the future direction of our key art traditions, such as carving and weaving? A classicising process which highlights only the most illustrious and important names in our genealogies. This process seems most unnatural considering the kaupapa of our heritage is made up of such a range of aho, as variegated as the many flecks in a blade of harakeke. Bearing in mind this predilection, on what basis do we insist some models in our art history hold greater importance than others? After all sometimes our means



of revering the material culture of the past rest on evidence as fragile as the archeologists last dig (a cultural construction in itself) or the fossickers lucky find. Are we to believe that all iwi were producing classical work at the time of prestige carving styles like that of Te Whānau-ā-Apanui (e.g. *Te Potaka*) were flowering around the eighteenth century?

A more recent example of the way in which we have become very focused on one taonga as representative of a wider cultural identity can be seen in the teaching of the Rotorua School of Carving. Since its inception early this century this school has been promoted among others the work of the Ngāti Kaipoho tohunga whakairo, Raharuhi Rukupo. The work of the Gisborne chief has been an important component in the building of a national style promoted through the School. This genre has been taught rigorously at the institute and disseminated through generations of students back to their own tribal areas around the country. But aside from the fact that Rukupo was a fine carver and his whare whakairo, *Te Hau ki Turanga*, is a rare survivor from the 1840's why concentrate on such a small part of a very large jigsaw? Operating as something of a palimpsest, its importance endorsed by its strategic geopolitical location, *Te Hau ki Turanga* represents a flowering in Māori art which has not found rest since its shipment to Wellington last century. What have we to say of Rukupo's many other contemporaries and their works which our culture has not been able to keep on museological life support and in permanent bloom?

### Influence of the West: a Māori renaissance?

I believe that Western culture has played a huge role in how we view our past, where we stand in the present and our artistic future. It is in Western culture that we find grand models for highlighting a glorious past and attempting to recreate it in the present. One of the key components in the Italian renaissance of the arts, of the sixteenth century, was its reverence for the artistic and cultural achievements of the more ancient Hellenistic civilization. Classical Greek culture was an inspiration in both the content and aesthetic of Western renaissance artists. In turn, this model through its introduction via Pākehā culture, has been an important influence on Māori thinking. The widely used term, "Māori renaissance" is one example of this acceptance. What artists like Shona Rapira Davies in her sculptural installation *Ngā Morehu* make us consider, is that one of the strongest legacies we share

with our tupuna is our ability to survive. And the business of First Nation peoples merely surviving the educational, health, economic, political and vocational spheres of wider New Zealand society undermines to a large extent any notion of current cultural rebirth as suggested by the word renaissance.

What I believe we, as Māori have a responsibility to query, is the legitimacy of this linear reading of our culture. Or, on the other hand, do we support the kaupapa set down by our ancestors? A view of the past like that of our natural environment, a cyclical system. By cyclical, I mean, there is no possibility of a classical moment, rather there are floriferous periods and there are phases of dormancy. There are seasons of spring and winter, day and night, life and death and renewal. After all death, as Ihenga indicated, bore a much promise for him as life. In the circumstances which prompted his much quoted saying, he knew that his line flowed as vigorously as the roots of the rengarenga. Through his sons and their connections, many of whom could be found in pā throughout the north Kaipara and the wider Tai Tokerau area, there was a second line of defense. It was the rito - the young growth in the rengarenga plant - which ensured that the wider system would survive.

### Dormancy and seasons in Māori art

There is something precarious about using classicism as a model for future development in the arts. Culture like the rengarenga lily has its own life cycle. A crucial part of a life system are the periods of dormancy required for storing up reserves for the next stage. In winter the growth of the rengarenga slows down, until the flush of spring. Equally, the seed dropped in summer and autumn lies dormant, within its hard outer protective shell until climatic conditions warm.

I am reminded here of ethnologist James McDonald of the Royal Ontario Museum and his work with the Tsimshian speaking peoples of north western British Columbia. McDonald has conducted ethnohistorical research with Band and Tribal councils whose central cultural motifs (i.e. the potlatch) had been banned and interfered with for 125 years by the Canadian government. There had been a break of some 60-70 years (in the 1930's) since one of the most important practices, the potlatch had been used. Once this restriction was lifted and its associated ceremonies were revived McDonald observed an interesting response from Tsimshian peoples. Speaking amongst themselves they found that, although they had not





practiced the visible form of the potlatch, they had for generations been implementing the values connected with the ceremony, such as gift exchange and hospitality. McDonald's account illustrates a cultural equivalent of seed dormancy seen in the plant system. In a cultural sense, all First Nations have and are still passing through a winter of colonisation. The temptation is to attempt to relive important artistic moments in our past while in the position of this cultural winter. There are many examples in Māori history where we have claimed renaissance by simply copying the aesthetic vessel that epitomized what is perceived as a classical moment. The waka that lie in disrepair or suffer from lack of use on marae around the country after the 1990 celebrations at Waitangi might be seen as one such example. Clearly it is the heritage of values which are important and carry longevity rather than simply the form.

### Judging ethnicity with binary opposites

At the centre of the debate regarding ethnicity in First Nation arts, however, is the insistence by cultural experts that the cultural vessel and its surrounding time cocoon, deserve highlighting at the expense of other considerations. At issue is whether or not the cultural object, style and or technique conforms to a predetermined set of values and a heritage believed to be traditional.

The recent work of cultural theorists such as Edward Said<sup>2</sup> and a wave of First Nation artists and curators such as Jimmy Durham has persuasively argued a linkage between economic imperialism and its other manifestations in the social, political, artistic and religious spheres of a culture. They have connected a fascination with classicism, correct traditions and the notion of authenticity with the philosophical position of Western European powers and their colonising activity throughout the new world primarily from the sixteenth century onwards. The West's desire to discover new territory and new resources also involved the need to locate a people essentially different in customs, appearance, cuisine, and attire. This can be seen in the celebrated eighteenth century Royal Academy painter Joshua Reynolds and his portrait of Omai, Captain James Cook's Tahitian translator. The first Polynesian to be represented at home in British painting and observed by their society, this Pacific Islander resembles more Laurence of Arabia with his flowing drapery and his turban than a Tahitian suitably attired in tapa cloth. Omai's historical

biographer Eric McCormack rightly points out this is an unusual cultural conjunction driven by the novelty of the occasion and the historic moment of discovery. Omai, the middle class Tahitian, in a format usually reserved for British nobility.

It was not so much a case of what was discovered as what identity was constructed, at the moment of discovery. There already exists a body of work by Pākehā scholars examining the notion of geographical and cultural distance between colony and the empire's heartland. There is an awareness that in the work of artists like those on Cook's explorative voyages, commonalities were often put aside. Instead an emphasis on difference under the various guises of noble savage, savage, exotic and primitive came to typify Western responses. An important issue to consider here is, does this search for virginity, locating an ancient version of mankind untainted by the spoils of Western civilization (best epitomized in the life and work of the French artist Paul Gauguin) continue?

More research into the role binary opposites play in the work of current Pākehā curators, historians, novelists, archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists is required. A belief in and the construction of an imaginary and idealistic past for Māori is unfortunately a backdrop to much research in the arts. Insistence on authenticity in Māori arts and culture is I believe essentially a Western construction. This viewpoint I believe has had a major influence on the way Māori have come to perceive themselves and the culture we have inherited. What we now must contend with is merely other more subverted versions of eighteenth and nineteenth century precedents (i.e noble savage, dusky maiden). There is a conviction that the purest form of the 'other' is that which is not tainted by contact with outside Western cultures. It is ironic then to find some Māori strongly involved in promoting this standpoint as well. Referring to the work of contemporary Māori artists in the exhibition catalogue *Te Māori*, anthropologist Sidney Mead rather gloomily asserts that ... 'New forms of art, borrowed from the traditions of the West, have been introduced into the Māori world. Māori artists trained in the artschools of the Pākehā are spearheading a movement to change the face of Māori art more radically than ever before. One does not know whether they innovate with love and understanding, or whether they are about to ignite new fires of destruction.' (Mead 1984: 75)

*Te Māori* as an exhibition whose objects were



selected by an American (Douglas Newton), a Pākehā ethnologist (Dave Simmons) and a Māori anthropologist (Sidney Mead), is a good example of the silencing not only of a female presence but also the contemporary dimension of our culture. A fear of new more assimilative artforms, which predicated Mead's passage above, meant not only exclusion, through the types of objects that were selected, but also by virtue of those left out (i.e taonga associated with nineteenth century Māori prophets, the twentieth century Taiapa school). The business of locating or being seen to locate Māori culture untainted by contact with the West would have to mean a search for models from (or strongly influenced by) an era prior to Western arrivals in Aotearoa. The influence of this point on people within First Nation cultures will be seen later on.

I have two examples to illustrate my point regarding the ongoing search on the part of Pākehā culture for virginity. Recently my family has become involved in the organisation CIOFF, a cultural branch of the United Nations organisation UNESCO. The organisation is committed to funding cultural performance groups from around the world, to display their culture as part of a smorgasbord of international talent at huge folk festivals around mainland Europe. One of the key criteria for funding is that the group demonstrate authenticity in their costume, songs, their adornment and even their weaponry. The question is, which historical phase does one look for as a point of reference for authenticity in Māori culture? Who is able to judge what is authentically Māori? As we looked through the photographs of previous trips the absurdity of this UNESCO task became clear. Painted moko, machine sewn taniko and a recurring guitar used as an accompaniment instrument and performers coming from a variety of tribal backgrounds and experiences all seemed obvious indicators of cultural syncretism rather than authenticity.

This insistence on correctness and cultural purity in First Nation cultures was also recently experienced by the Koori curator Djon Mundine. He recounted to me a degree of disappointment with the attitudes of European museums to a Koori art exhibition he travelled with throughout European centres. He attributed the recurring museological rejection of the show's content with the fact that the artists represented demonstrated as much connection with the Western fine arts aesthetic as an inherited Aboriginal visual language. What Mundine discovered was that what many European museum people do not want to see is a reflection

of their own culture in First Nation art. Sameness is a problem, difference is essential.

Museum and cultural heritage studies lecturer Dr Amareswar Galla of the University of Canberra says 'it is a common adage that those who control your cultural heritage control the way others think about you' (Post Colonial Formations conference, Griffith University, 7 - 9 July, 1993). Wanting a culture to exhibit some formal attributes is really both a rejection of the current dimension of that culture and an endorsement of only a limited proportion of it. Returning to the rengarenga metaphor, it is like extolling the plants bloom while failing to acknowledge changes in season. It is now winter and the flower has fruited, dropped its seed head and its above ground beauty long since died away. Picture Gauguin's disappointment on arrival in late nineteenth century Papeete. The mourning of a classical form of Tahitian life and culture imagined yet irreparably deconstructed by the arrival and messy cultural intermixture with the French colonial machine and the Catholic church. Clearly, Māori must develop a strategy that better copes with the demand from Pākehā that we supply boundaries and exhibit behaviour in keeping with their expectations regarding our ethnicity. The process of cultural redefinition by Māori artists in the urban context is a major concern to the watchdogs of tradition (both Māori and Pākehā). Decentralising funding and museum structures would probably be factors essential in any move beyond our simply being a culture which responds to this desire for definition (or to the legal and strategic requirements of local or central government as in the case of the Museum of New Zealand and the *Te Waka Toi* dimension of *Creative New Zealand*).

Today even the word 'Māori' might be looked on as a simplistic way of packaging the complex variety of tribal cultures found within these islands and controlling them. Extending Galla's observation regarding cultural control and destiny. If the construction of the Māori identity involves strong Pākehā input. If a preoccupation with our classical past is merely a reflection of Pākehā romanticism. If there never was a classical period, just as there never was a concept of Māori, before the European arrived. If the islands of this country were simply occupied by South Pacific peoples, bound together by links of common ancestry, contemporary kinship, geographic location and more pertinently, a desperate need for group survival. Then perhaps we need to rethink the way in



which we might view history in order to regain control over our future.

If we now have to deal concurrently with not only the shining models of our past, the *Kaitaia lintel*, the Tainui monument *Uenukutuwhatu*, the carved work of Rukupo as well as the twentieth century pioneering work of film animator Lisa Reihana or the architecture of John Scott, we must think very carefully about how we construct a culture of inclusiveness. The way forward I believe involves a return again to the thinking of leaders from our past, to the words of people such as Ihenga, regarding survival. The major work by Ralph Hotere entitled, *Black Phoenix* encapsulates much of Ihenga's notion of regeneration. Rather than struggling with the obvious differences in visual language (compared with more traditional forms), we might think of ideas simply taking on different forms. What the burnt out hull of this fishing boat from Carey's Bay does illustrate, is that the essence of who we are as Māori, has as much to do with the death of vessels from the past, as the maintenance and revival of these forms in the present. Painter Darcy Nicholas, writing on Māori artist John Ford said that like the transformation of harakeke into muka and then into a beautiful korowai, 'nothing in the Māori world dies it merely takes on a new dimension'. This saying, like Hotere's work, demonstrates the cyclical dimension of our existence as Māori. We are living in a world where all things may find redefinition and where even death involves life.

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<sup>1</sup> The Arawa tupuna (we use this form in the North) Ihenga visited family in the Tai Tokerau region. His travels are well known to Northern people. My interest in Ihenga is personal and localised. Among the many important tribal symbols which he named is my grandfather's maunga Whatitiri at Porotiti. More recently, I encountered Māori lecturers from Waiariki Polytechnic involved in researching Ihenga's travels, while out on a major pā site at the entrance of Kaipara's South Head. The information and experience of our northern area which they were gathering was being used in conjunction with the whare whakairo Ihenga, whose decoration Lionel Grant has been supervising at Waiariki. The whakataukī quoted is said to have been used by Ihenga in response to an attack made on him while visiting a North Kaipara pā.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Edward Said's two influential texts *Orientalism*. (1978). Random House: London and *Culture and Imperialism*. (1993). Vintage: London.

## References

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